

The man who wasn't there

For years, a painted mime in a Joburg mall has been enthralling passers-by with his enigmatic presence. **Oliver Roberts** goes in search of the man's other identity. Photographs by **Simpfiwe Nkwali**

FROM the moment you are conceived and begin to grow and twist inside the womb, your body is never truly still again until you die. You might feel specks of stillness — drifting in a pool looking at the sky, clutching a lover's body or kneeling in prayer — but even in sleep you are restless, a body moving without consent.

In Joburg, there is a man — if you will allow me to call him that — who understands what it is to be so still that people do not know if he is human or statue, dead or alive; so still that he sees everything, because he does not blink. And, sometimes, as if finally dead, he stops breathing.

If you've been to Rosebank Mall on the weekend, you'll have spotted him — yellow face, black school uniform and a plastic bucket full of money. Though always silent and with eyes that never focus, he is able to hold the attention of the hundreds who pass him.

Some react with fear (children run away and cry); many are intrigued (staring and approaching and poking: 'Look at the

funny man'); others are humoured and delighted ('He's brilliant, just brilliant').

Paki mali uzoboma is a Zulu expression meaning, 'Put money, and you'll see.' Give this inanimate a few bucks and he begins to dance, sparkling into life like someone revived. Yes, it's funny to see him move, but I think people generally toss a coin this man's way just to confirm their hopes (or maybe fears) that he's a living thing.

A few days before the clock strikes Saturday and he transforms into a wooden schoolboy again, I go and visit the funny man at his flat in Braamfontein. When I first see him — that is, the him who is not the him I last saw as a statue — I feel an absurd sense of confusion, because he is busy stuffing some chicken into his mouth. "So ... he cats," I think, with all the dismay of a child who's just been told that Santa Claus does not exist. He stretches out his hand: "Hi, I'm Prince. Prince Robertson."

● To view more photographs of Prince Robertson go to <http://multimedia.thetimes.co.za/> and follow the link



SUNDAY 10AM: Robertson, 25, who quit his job as an automotive engineer in 2004 because his street performance pays better (he was earning R800 a week as an engineer), is preparing himself in the security guards' kitchen, set deep inside the greasy bowels of the mall's basement parking lot. At first he is talkative, explaining that it takes him about 40 minutes to apply the four layers of acrylic paint to his face. "When I first started doing this in 2000," he says, "I would apply only one layer, but I didn't feel any different; I could still sense my skin, and it bothered me — I realised people were looking at my skin and not the paint. Also, the single layer would start to crack after

about two hours and I would have to go back and redo it. Then I started using acrylics. With four layers, I can stand there all day without the paint coming off. More layers mean more money." Once the second layer has been applied, Robertson stops speaking. I am unsure whether this is to stop the paint from cracking or if I'm witnessing the metamorphosis of human to puppet. The only sounds are the intermittent bursts of running water as he cleans his paintbrush, and the shuffle of his feet. Knowing that he usually does this alone, standing there in that uniform, meticulously applying his comical make-up, fills me with a curious sadness.



10.50AM: We begin making our way through the service tunnels that lead to the court where Robertson performs. The cleaning staff are obviously used to the appearance of this doll-like spectre skipping past them under the industrial lighting — some whoop and wave in familiar greeting, others don't even lift their heads. Stanley Kubrick would have loved this. "I got the inspiration for my costume from a wooden statue that I saw in a flea market," Robertson tells me in his Braamfontein flat. "I had been using white paint for a long time before that but I got tired of it, because a white face is the same as a clown. And I am not a clown." The door opens and Robertson hops out into the court; it's like watching an actor walking onto stage. He is very definitely not the same person I spoke to an hour ago — the demure man has been mechanically possessed by a boy. It's an awkward transition because the photographer and I — after secretive exchanges with Robertson the human — have been left behind by Robertson the toy. We are no longer part of his world; or rather he is no longer part of ours.



12.25AM: Stopping in his usual spot, Robertson puts his money bucket down, does a little dance and then freezes. Within 30 seconds, a woman pours some change into the container. Robertson gyrates and shuffles as she passes with a smile. "The purpose of a mime artist is to entertain people — adults, children, and those who are sad," says Robertson. "The moment they see me, the sadness goes away." Robertson usually works three days a week at the mall and sometimes performs at parties and functions. I watch with a kind of scrutinising fascination, waiting for him to show

signs of movement. The morning light reflecting off his make-up gives him the appearance of a plastic mould. He is as still as this. "I must never move," Robertson says. "Sometimes a fly lands on my face and it wants to go up my nose or into my mouth, but I have to remain still. Even the fly doesn't know that I am a human." Standing still is hard work. Accustomed to generous movement, our bodies forget how to be motionless and start to clot and cramp and go numb. Robertson has conditioned himself to become an athletic mannequin.



3.30PM: A huge group of Scottish tourists has formed a semi-circle of attention around Robertson. Cellphones are out taking pictures, some of the tourists prod him: "He's like a doll," says one. The reactions of onlookers are what motivates Robertson to stand there all day. However, the interaction is strange because, for all the enchantment he evokes in people, he cannot respond with any discernible expression. "I laugh inside myself," he says. "To me, it's like a game. I enjoy the way people look at me and can't figure me out, and touch my hand to see if I'm real; then they say, 'He's alive! I told you! He's

alive!'" Robertson says that he sometimes sees his friends walk by and they don't recognise him. Every so often, perhaps for the thrill, Robertson (when he's human again) goes into the shops that he performs next to. "They say, 'I know you from somewhere, but I can't figure it out. Are you on television?'" Some people put their business cards in the money box just so that Robertson will call them — they want to hear him speak. For Robertson, a devout Christian, these hours of circus stillness give him spiritual refuge. "I think about many things when I stand there," he says.



5.15PM: It's 5pm and we're back where everything first changed — in the kitchen. Robertson is still not talking — who is he now that nobody is watching him? He is moving fluidly again, celebrating an anatomical liberty that can only be understood if you've been frozen for the better part of six hours. Listening to Robertson washing his head and face now, the gushing sound of water does not seem as lonely as it did when he prepared himself earlier this morning. I wonder if this is because the two people that he is — man and boy

— have gradually joined as the day progressed. Robertson peels the dried paint off his face like a mask and, in an instant, the illusion is over. The act of throwing the ragged glob of black and yellow skin into the rubbish bin is utterly macabre, as if a murder — or mercy killing — has just been carried out. And there he is again — the man with the pockmarked cheeks and blinking eyes who I first met in a flat in Braamfontein. I realise then that what Robertson performs is not mimicry or parody, but a disappearing act.